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THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20505

National Intelligence Council

NIC 850-83

31 January 1983

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MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence
Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

THROUGH: Chairman, National Intelligence Council

FROM: Constantine C. Menges
National Intelligence Officer for Latin America

SUBJECT: Request of United Nations Ambassador for Assessment
Regarding Significance of Current Military Infighting
in El Salvador*

1. Despite the agreements reached with Defense Minister Garcia and rebel Army Commander Ochoa earlier this month, the power struggle within the military has yet to be resolved. There is about a 30 percent chance that the conflict could get out of hand resulting in a coup by military officers or a standoff between rival government military units. On balance, the judgment is that the dispute will be resolved in such a way that the government's counterinsurgency effort and reform program will not be seriously impaired.

2. Earlier this month, the military high command sought to reduce tensions by giving Ochoa a choice assignment in Washington and by gaining Garcia's promise to retire in two or three months. Some military units are concerned that Garcia might renege on his promise, but we believe he lacks the military and political support to extend his stay in office. Opposition to Garcia stems from ideological differences, the belief of many younger officers that Garcia and his generation of officers should retire, opening the way for their advancement, and frustration over Garcia's reluctance to adopt a more aggressive war strategy.

3. Extreme right Assembly leader D'Aubuisson has increasingly tried to exploit military dissatisfaction with Garcia, and some of his ultrarightist supporters may try to block the appointment of General Vides Casanova, a relative moderate, who is next in line for Garcia's post. Vides Casanova probably shares Garcia's commitment to the government's reform program, but lacks a strong base of support in the armed forces. If the ultraconservatives, who probably represent about 15 percent of the armed forces officers, emerge from the succession struggle in a dominant position, the viability of the government and its programs will be undermined.

*DI/ALA and DDO have seen and coordinated this memorandum.

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President Magana, who in recent months has been increasingly assertive in standing up to the far right, would lose a critical base of support, thus opening the way for the ultraconservatives to roll back most of the reforms that had been implemented since October 1979. Most military leaders, however, are center-right in political orientation and pragmatic; they recognize the key role such reforms have played in obtaining and sustaining international and popular support for the government, and they probably would move successfully to block any attempted "takeover" by ultraconservative forces.

4. In the wake of the bombing of ARENA party headquarters last week, the potential for some escalation in political violence also should be noted. If the bitter rivalry between Garcia and D'Aubuisson intensifies, more bombings, shootings and assassinations could result from the actions of their supporters. Deceptive violence could also be initiated by the extreme left.*

Impact on the Guerrilla War

5. The military power struggle has damaged unity within the armed forces, and the guerrillas will continue to exploit it for maximum propaganda and tactical effect. In recent weeks the insurgents have stepped up their attacks throughout the country while launching what is developing into a major offensive in northeastern El Salvador. They have long planned an offensive for early this year and may have advanced the timetable to take advantage of the military rebellion.

6. The military has responded with a large counteroffensive -- in part to show that the political bickering in San Salvador has not diminished its ability to carry out the war. It probably will be able to retake the province in the next few weeks, although heavy losses could be incurred. If the guerrillas inflict a major tactical defeat on the Army, the far right in both the military and the civilian government likely would gain strength and the chances for a coup would increase significantly.


Constantine C. Menges

*This judgment is the NIO/LA's.

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